

# THE CHRISTIAN TREASURY

## A FAMILY MISCELLANY

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EDINBURGH,  
JOHNSTONE HUNTER & CO.  
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## THE DOOM OF ABSALOM.

BY THE REV. THEODORE L. CUYLER, D.D.



HERE is a sun-setting in the noon of life that is worth our most careful study. Here is an obituary which the Spirit of inspiration has prepared for the reading and the reflection of all after generations. It is a sudden end, and more than end; it is a total, terrible wreck of all—hope, name, character, and immortal soul. It is a catastrophe in kind such as we sometimes behold in our own time and country, and such as the omniscient eye often has beheld in this world, where sin rears its own gibbet and becomes its own executioner. We could hardly expect any other end for a man who began wrong, who lived wrong, and continued in the path of wrong to the dark and bloody end.

Absalom began wrong. Mark this, parents and educators of the young! Let all Sabbath-schools, all young men and maidens, note this fact, that the very first step in the recorded history of Absalom was in a crooked path. The key to his remarkable and wretched career is found in the one word *deceit*. His very name is a synonym of treachery. We do not read of a single act in all his life that was open and above-board; everything was tortuous and treacherous, conceived in cunning and brought forth in iniquity.

His first practice of deceit was when his brother Amnon, for the gratification of his lawless lust, had violated his beautiful half-sister Tamar. Amnon was the eldest son of David, by Ahinoam the Jezreelitess; Absalom and Tamar were the children by Maacah, the daughter of the King of Geshur. For the infamous crime of Amnon there was no more excuse than there would be for wilful murder; and while King David felt and uttered the most bitter indignation, he forbore to punish the criminal because he was his first-born. (So are we informed by a passage from the Septuagint.) Two wrongs never make one right: Absalom's plot to assassinate his eldest

brother had no justification in the lecherous crime of that guilty brother. The law of the land did not make Absalom the avenger of his sister. But behind the spirit of revenge there must have lurked a deeper and subtler purpose—to remove out of the way an elder brother, who would be the heir-apparent to the throne of Israel. So the wily Absalom opens his house to his deflowered sister, and then plots the murder of her ravisher. 'Hold thy peace, my sister,' whispers the wily man; 'he is thy brother; regard not this thing.' As if he had said, 'Leave this thing to me, and say nothing.'

By-and-by comes his opportunity. At the time of the annual sheep-shearing, when the accustomed feast for that occasion was prepared, Absalom sent an urgent invitation to his elder brother to be present at the festival. The secret instructions given to the servants were more worthy of a Spanish bandit than of the son of Israel's Psalmist. 'Mark you now,' says the treacherous chief-assassin—'mark you now, when Amnon's heart is merry with wine, and when I say unto you, Smite Amnon, then *kill him*. Fear not; have I not commanded you?' The scarlet edict is executed to the letter. The sword is drawn in David's own family—that destroying sword which he had provoked by his own crime against Uriah, for God had declared, 'Evil shall be raised up against thee out of thine own house.' In the midst of the feast, when the licentious Amnon has drunk himself into pitiable powerlessness, in upon him rush the armed servants of the master of the house, and a brother's blood stains the floor of the banquet-room. 'For the servants of Absalom did unto Amnon as Absalom had commanded.'

So ends the first chapter in a career of treachery. But it is only the prelude to the more extended and eventful chapter which describes the treasonable plot to usurp a father's throne and to crush a fond, over-indulgent father's heart. Of all the details of

Absalom's conspiracy, of the wily acts of the demagogue which he practised in order to steal away the favour of the people from their sovereign, and of that most astounding trick of hypocrisy by which he went to Hebron under a pretence to 'serve the Lord,' but with a secret purpose to head a rebellion—of all these sickening details the previous context treats at length. One most significant fact must not be overlooked, for it illustrates how the arch-deceiver was himself the victim of a deception.

Ahithophel, who had been beguiled away from his allegiance to King David, advised Absalom to take possession of his father's harem in Jerusalem and to send a powerful army to strike down the royal forces at a single summary blow. This counsel, followed out, might have given success to the rebellion and to the usurper. But a sagacious friend of David, one Hushai, who had joined himself to Absalom in order to mislead him by his crafty counsel, gave an opinion which led to the rejection of the counsel of Ahithophel. Hushai's treacherous counsel is greedily swallowed by the traitor—the deceiver is himself deceived. So doth God leave the crafty to be taken in their own craftiness. Absalom, the traitor against his country and his King, is stung by a treason in his own ranks. Having dug a pit of falsehood and crime, how soon he is himself engulfed in one which proves to be a bottomless pit of retribution and ruin! For when did a man ever undertake a stupendous system of fraud without finding himself, sooner or later, completely entangled in the meshes of his own artifice, and hopelessly betrayed by that arch-gamster, Satan, who is the father of all lies? *Deceit is its own destruction*, is the striking 'moral' which flares out on the forefront of all Absalom's career, from the crafty assassination at Baal-hazor to the final overthrow in the wood of Ephraim.

Let us now turn our eyes upon the tragical doom which forms the fitting wind-up of one of the most remarkable chapters in Old Testament history. It began in cunning craft, it was carried on with crime, it ended in carnage.

King David unfurls his royal standard at Mahanaim, an important walled town on the east side of the river Jordan, and south of the brook Jabbok. He rallies his loyal troops, who are ready to stand by the 'old flag' under which they had fought so often, and fought so well; he divides them into three army corps, and sets over them 'captains of thousands and captains of hundreds.' Joab, the ablest

of his field-m Marshals, commands the first corps; Abishai commands the second; Ittai, the Gittite, commands the third. David offers to lead the whole, but his people will not consent that he risk the sacred life that is 'worth ten thousand' of their own. So he takes his place beside the city gate, and, as Napoleon used to review his grand army as it marched forth to battle, the old King of Israel reviews the veterans as they file past by hundreds and by thousands. His heart is full of agony: the campaign is not against uncircumcised Philistines, or any foreign foe—it is against his own son, his beloved son, his petted and ungrateful son, his own splendid, reckless, ruined Absalom! Bitter as is the heart of the royal army toward the traitor, the old father's heart is as soft as water. The atrocious crime against a father's crown and father's life was not sufficient to quench a father's blind, inextinguishable affection. Few passages in any literature are more pathetic than David's last injunction to his officers in command. He calls Joab and the other marshals around him, and says to each of them, 'Deal gently, for my sake, with the young man, even with Absalom.'

Oh, how bad a son may be to the kindest of parents! and yet how tender a parent may be to the worst of children! 'Deal gently with him for my sake.' How often do we hear this pathetic plea from heartbroken parents in behalf of their transgressing and dishonoured offspring! 'My son is guilty,' sobs out the father's wounded heart; 'he has indeed committed the theft, or the forgery, or the deed of violence, but, oh! do not bind the prison-fetters on the hands that I once led in boyish innocence!—My poor daughter has sinned, and sinned herself into the shadow of a dark shame; but deal gently with her for that mother's sake who is now an angel before the throne of God.' David! David! thou speakest like a father, but those iron-clad men listen to thee only like warriors. They are men of blood, and they are going out to do soldiers' work. 'Dealing gently' is not the tactics of a battlefield. In a few hours the armed hosts are out of sight, moving rapidly toward the wood of Ephraim, which lay upon the east side of the Jordan, in the land of Gilead.

Absalom comes up with his rebel army, confident of victory. The royal army meets him in the wood of Ephraim, and for hours the fight, like the sanguinary fight in the Virginia 'Wilderness,' was scattered over the face of all the country. The wood devours more than

the sword, amid its pits, precipices, and morasses; and the carnage on the side of the insurgents is terrible. Through one of the thickets of terebinths rode the effeminate 'young pretender,' endeavouring to escape from the battlefield. He has gone into the fight with his long tresses unshorn, and as the royal mule passes through the thick branches of a terebinth tree his locks are caught. His long hair becomes his halter, and the affrighted mule dashes away, leaving him suspended 'between the heaven and the earth.'

One of the loyal soldiers discovers him in this pitiful plight and tells his commander, Joab, 'Behold, I saw Absalom hanged in a terebinth.' 'Why didst thou not smite him there to the ground?' exclaims the iron-hearted general; 'I would have given thee ten shekels of silver and a girdle.' 'Though I should receive a thousand shekels,' replies the fine-hearted fellow, 'yet would I not put forth my hand against the King's son; for the King charged thee, Beware that none touch the young man Absalom.' No one remembers the royal charge better than Joab does, but King and country are more to him than a father's suffering heart. 'I cannot lose time in talk,' is the substance of Joab's impetuous reply, and, hastening to the spot, he drives three darts through the quivering form of the young traitor. Ten armour-bearers compass the wounded, dangling body, and thrust their weapons through it until life is extinct.

For that lifeless form a stately monument had been prepared by the proud Absalom years before in the vale of Shareh, south-east of Jerusalem. There his name, perpetuated by no son, was to be kept in honourable remembrance. Ah, how little did he then dream of the ignominious sepulture that awaited him! For the soldiers cast the mangled body of the traitor into a pit, and hurled a great heap of stones upon it. His life had been the life of a dastard, his burial is the burial of a dog. To this day no Israelite passes even that fictitious monument in the valley of Jehoshaphat (which erroneously passes for the 'Tomb of Absalom') without flinging a stone at it and exclaiming, 'Cursed be the memory of Absalom! and cursed be every child who rises up in rebellion against his parents!'

We also re-echo the righteous malediction, 'Cursed be the memory of the son who began with the assassination of a brother and ended in unholy war upon a grey-haired father! Into a pit which his deceitful heart has digged

he falls through deceit himself. The indulged son is the ruined son, the shame of his father and the bitterness of her who bare him. Oh, that bitterness! Into every soul in the army, even into Joab's hard heart, the iron enters. Even he relents into a strange tenderness over the tragedy when he says to Ahimaaz, 'This day thou shalt bear no tidings, because the King's son is dead.' Joab knows too well what terrible tidings must be carried, and so he would fain excuse Ahimaaz, his own friend and a favourite of his royal master, from so unwelcome an office. But there is a Cushite standing by—probably a foreign slave who had acted as a courier before—and Joab feels no scruple in loading the awful message upon his shoulders. So he says to the nimble-footed Cushite, 'Go, tell the King what thou hast seen,' and the Cushite salutes his master with a low salaam and runs. Evil news flies fast. But Ahimaaz, anxious that the good tidings of the victory shall be borne first to the monarch's ears, persists in his request to be the message-bearer. 'Run then,' replies Joab; and Ahimaaz chooses the easier road to Mahanaim, which lay across the plain. The Cushite has chosen the more difficult road over the hills of Gilead. The first courier to come in sight is Ahimaaz. As the anxious old monarch sits waiting between the gates, the watchman on the tower calls down to him that the running of the foremost courier is like the running of Ahimaaz, the son of Zadok. 'He is a good man,' eagerly responds the expectant sovereign; 'he is a good man, and he cometh with good tidings.' Into the royal presence bursts the panting racer, and shouts aloud, 'Shalom! Shalom!' ('All is well!') The first intelligence which Ahimaaz reveals is indeed glorious; the rebellion is overthrown, and David's life, and throne, and crown are saved. But to the father's trembling heart what are throne or crown in comparison with the idolised, ungrateful son? And the King says eagerly, 'Is Absalom safe?' No answer to that question, but a sorry quibble instead of it. Here comes the Cushite: 'Tidings, my lord the King! The Lord God hath avenged thee this day of all that rose up against thee.' But, 'Is the young man Absalom safe?' is the first question thrust back into the face of the tired courier. The Cushite, with wonderful delicacy, as if he would wrap an arrow around with felt, answers, 'The enemies of my lord the King, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is.'

Make way for the poor old man now, and

let him pass along. Lend him an arm, as he staggers up to the chamber over the gate. Talk not to him now about battles, or victories, or crowns. His heart is coming out. And as he ascends the stairway, we hear his wailing and bitter cry: 'O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!' The door closes, and shuts in the weeping father. He is alone with his crushing grief—such a grief as more than one crushed parent in our day is made to feel. But through the closed doors we overhear the same continual wail, 'O Absalom, Absalom! my son, my son!' Out through the streets flies the thrilling intelligence. The glorious victory leaps from tongue to tongue, and the people gather around the gateway with a strange mingling of joy for the triumph and of sympathy for the poor old heart that is breaking beneath its robes of royalty. As the crowd swarms together they hear no shouts of triumph, no blasts of horn or of trumpet, but with a hushed and pitying awe they listen to the plaintive cries as they break forth from that chamber of agony: 'O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!'

Well mayest thou weep, heartbroken father, for thou didst bring all this upon thine own grey head. This bitter agony is thine own merited punishment. Absalom has paid the awful penalty of his iniquities; upon him has been fulfilled the divine anathema, 'Whoso curseth father and mother, let him die the death.' But thine own sin has at last found thee out, and is laying on its lash of bloody retribution. God's mill grinds slowly, but thine own heart is being crushed beneath the stones. Does any one inquire, 'For what was King David punished?' We answer that he

had been guilty of at least a fourfold sin:—

1. He had indulged Absalom with a weak, and a wanton, and a wicked indulgence; the son repaid the criminal folly with contempt and cruelty. Millions of spoiled children have repeated this same retribution ever since.

2. David had deceived Uriah by a detestable trick, that makes our blood boil as we read of it. Absalom, the arch-deceiver, paid him back 'in his own coin' at compound interest.

3. David's crime of uncleanness had been perpetrated not many years before. When Nathan, the prophet, had rebuked the adulterous deed, he said to the royal libertine, 'Behold, the Lord will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house; and thy wives will be given to thy neighbour, and he shall lie with them in sight of this sun.' Of the shameless acts perpetrated by Absalom in the royal harem at Jerusalem during his father's brief exile, we need only remind you.

4. Finally, the Psalmist-king, whose lust, when it had conceived, had brought forth sin, discovers to us how sin when it is full grown bringeth forth death. The blood of Uriah has come back upon his own head; the desolator of Uriah's home has found his own house left to him desolate.

That heap of stones over the mangled form of Absalom is the fitting doom of filial ingratitude and a lifelong career of deception. That broken heart in the tower of Mahanaim is the just retribution of the sins once committed by David himself in the palace of Jerusalem. And it was the memory of those sins which, like a ghost that will not be 'laid,' wailed, and sobbed, and cried aloud in that upper chamber, 'O Absalom, Absalom! my son, my son!'

### I will Sing unto the Lord a New Song.



S there secret sorrow pressing, sorely  
pressing thy poor heart?  
Do you bear a heavy burden, you  
would very gladly part?  
Some great stone of guilt so crush-  
ing, that you never can remove?  
Do you grieve that all your trying  
only can your weakness prove?

Do you fear because the daylight passeth, and  
the night is long?  
When you cannot, in the darkness, see the foes  
that round you throng;  
When you cannot see the blossoms that you  
gathered through the day,  
And in fear and dread you picture all the  
perils of the way.

Is it all thy sin's dark story causeth thee to  
shrink in dread  
From the chapter dark, and blotted o'er with  
stains of guilty red?  
And thine eyes are hot with weeping, while  
thy heart grows cold in fear,  
And thy blinded spirit crieth, 'I can find no  
refuge near!'

I have sinned in doubting Jesus, I have fallen,  
I have known  
What it is to be without Him, and to try to  
walk alone;  
Years my sick and weary spirit weakly lay  
along the ground,  
Where the fair but fading blossoms of our  
mortal life abound.